

# Hedi Mertens

## *Logic and Intuition*

### Feb 8 – May 5, 2024

MEDIA ORIENTATION  
Feb 6, 2024, 11 am

OPENING  
Feb 7, 2024, 6 to 9 pm

Curated by Evelyne Bucher

Museum Haus Konstruktiv is honoring Hedi Mertens (b. 1893 in Gossau, SG, d. 1982 in Carona, TI) in a retrospective solo exhibition. This Swiss artist made an important contribution to constructivist-concrete art with her oeuvre, which began comparatively late and was mostly based on systematic studies of the square.

When Hedi Mertens began painting constructivist-concrete works in 1960, she was 67 years old. This late start is surprising, given that Mertens had opted for a classical art education in Switzerland and Germany back in 1912. After producing some early expressionist pictures, she stopped painting in the 1930s, but her interest in art remained. As an astute observer of the contemporary scene, she was in a lively exchange with the art-and-culture enthusiasts who passed through Bünishof, the house in Feldmeilen that she and her husband Walter Mertens called home, between 1930 and 1944. Alongside her exploration of spiritual matters (in 1938/39, Mertens went to India and stayed in an ashram), her encounters with the constructivist-concrete artists Leo Leuppi and Richard Paul Lohse had a lasting influence on her understanding of art. She maintained close contact with Lohse in particular, frequently discussing “problems regarding constructivist formulations” with him. “I paint pictures that are akin to yours, but only in my dreams,” she wrote in a 1951 letter to Lohse.

Another nine years passed before Mertens resumed her artistic work. By then, she was living in the Ticino village of Carona, where she shared accommodation with the considerably younger Arend Fuhrmann (b. 1918 in Hamburg, d. 1984 in Carona). Inspired by a lecture on Chinese music, she engaged with geometric abstraction and, in less than two decades, created an impressively mature oeuvre comprising around 200 works, in which the square form appears in very different variations and with a wide range of color gradations.

Haus Konstruktiv has already exhibited Hedi Mertens, in the 1989 group show *Five Female Painters from One Generation: Gisela Andersch, Vera Haller, Jenny Losinger-Ferri, Hedi Mertens, Elsy Wiskemann*. Now, around 25 years later, we are

dedicating a retrospective to her alone, which begins in the last room on the fifth floor and ends with works from her final creative period on the fourth floor.

Hedi Mertens's oeuvre is characterized by the duality of logic and intuition. Rational strictness manifests itself primarily in her consistent use of the square, be it as the painting's defining format (sometimes standing on its corner or multiplied in a landscape format) or as a basic module with which the artist systematically organizes her pictures by means of grids, division, multiplication, mirroring and other geometric operations. This rational approach is contrasted with free intuitive use of color, which clearly sets Mertens apart from her colleagues in the Zurich Concretists' milieu. Without following any inherent color-determining logic, Mertens used primary colors, black, white, delicate pastel shades and brightly vibrant mixed colors in various nuances, which she applied to the canvas in a sometimes opaque, sometimes translucent, sometimes cloudy and often homogeneous manner. This led to color contrasts and color combinations that are quite unconventional in the context of constructivist-concrete art.

The earliest pieces on display at Haus Konstruktiv include the two 1961 works *Quadratgruppe auf der Grundlage eines Quadrates* (Group of Squares Based on a Square) and *Zwei Quadratgruppen I* (Two Groups of Squares I). Squares of different sizes are distributed on the canvas, such that proportional relationships allow them to be combined in groups. The early works also include *Ineinandergeschobene Quadrate in horizontaler Bewegung II* (Interlocking Squares With Horizontal Movement II, 1961) and *Vertikaler Aufbau degressiver, sich entwickelnder Quadrate II* (Vertical Build-Up of Degressive Developing Squares II, 1963/64). Both show freely positioned sequences of increasingly smaller (i.e. degressive) squares on a light background – a design principle that Theo van Doesburg, one of the founders of concrete art, was already using in his 1930s compositions.

In 1963, Hedi Mertens's visual arrangements started to become denser. For example, in *Rhythmische Bewegung mit Quadraten und Rechtecken I* (Rhythmic Movement With Squares and Rectangles I, 1963) the entire picture surface is divided into six vertical sections: Each comprises a square and four rectangles of different sizes, the smallest and largest of which can be joined to form a square. In *Verbindung von zwei Quadratfeldern durch rhythmisch akzentuierte Bewegungen* (Joining of Two Square Fields via Rhythmically Accentuated Movements, 1964), the artist dispenses with the rectangular form and, in a markedly asymmetrical manner, positions squares in the image's interior, with the size ratio 1:4:9:16, such that elements of the same size touch each other as little as necessary.

Mertens spent a relatively long time addressing the motif of the square staircase – a configuration that Lohse and Camille Graeser had also explored. Following on from her degressive squares, they show an ascending or descending, horizontally or vertically arranged sequence of three squares with different sizes, usually in a ratio of 4:9:16. These sequences of square steps are each combined with rectangles of different lengths, such that they merge to form a superordinate square unit. *Zwei horizontale Felder mit rhythmisch akzentuierten gleichen Einheiten* (Two Horizontal Fields With Rhythmically Accentuated Equal Units, 1963) is the earliest example of this modular arrangement. Other exhibits with staircase formations show how varied this group of works is. In 1969, Mertens returned to this compositional scheme, but increasingly relied on strong vertical accents, bolder colors and harsher contrasts. In some cases, the system of steps is dissolved by the combining of individual units to

form larger monochrome surfaces, as seen in the 1970 pieces *Neun farbig gegliederte Quadratgruppen, senkrecht, waagrecht akzentuiert* (Nine Groups of Squares Structured by Color, Accentuated Vertically and Horizontally) and *Spiel in flächengebundenen Quadrateinheiten* (Playing With Surface-Bound Square Units).

Between 1965 and 1971, Mertens produced an extensive series in which she intensively engaged with square grids. The basic structure of this group is always the same: The picture surface is divided into a grid of 16 square fields, which in turn are subdivided into 9 smaller square units. Some of these minimal units stand out because of their coloring and establish links with other square units. The static internal structure is thus dynamized, as seen in the piece *16 Quadrat-Einheiten: 8 Quadrat-Einheiten werden aktiviert durch kleine weisse aufsteigende Quadrate, gehalten durch rosa Doppelquadrat* (16 Square Units: 8 Square Units are Activated by Small White Ascending Squares, Held by Pink Double Square, 1967).

The visual structures in the series *Vierseitig gleiche Einheiten, in der Mitte sich treffend* (Units Equal on Four Sides, Meeting in the Middle, 1968/69 – the title varies slightly) are characterized by a particularly dense grid. This image type, strongly inspired by the work of Richard Paul Lohse, comprises an inner polychrome square core, with no units of the same color touching each other, and an outer square border in which fields of the same color combine to form rhythmically arranged stripe formations. With increasing dissolution of close-meshed all-over grid structures, Mertens returned to the theme of figure and ground. She created compositions in which she positioned geometric elements in the image much more freely and playfully. Examples of this include *Grundgrün, helles Eisblau, gelbe + rote Striche* (Underlying Green, Light Ice-Blue, Yellow + Red Lines, 1971) and *Senkrecht und waagrecht laufende dreifache Quadrate fallen und steigen durch drei Grundquadrate (Mandala)* (Vertical and Horizontal Triple Squares Falling and Rising Through Three Underlying Squares (Mandala), 1969).

At the start of the 1970s, she produced works with a large central monochrome square and three smaller squares revolving around it, one of them touching the central square at one corner, while the other two, diagonally opposite, dock onto it with one side, as seen in *Weisser Grund, schwarz, drei rote Quadrate um blaue Mitte* (White Background, Black, Three Red Squares Around Blue Center, 1971). In *Diagonale Quadratkette mit rotem Quadrat* (Diagonal Chain of Squares With Red Square, 1973), the underlying scheme of rotating squares undergoes a further formal development, in that the painting itself is made to stand on its corner. The elements positioned within the image create a chain of squares arranged in steps. *Singender Quadratrhythmus* (Singing Square Rhythm, 1973) is also standing on its corner, whereby the interior of this painting follows on from the configurations of rhythmically accentuated movement developed around 1964.

In a separate group of works, Mertens addressed the motif of the square within a square – always placed in a corner, it is supplemented with squares lined up in an L-shape. Examples of this are exhibited on the fourth floor: *Komposition mit drei weissen Quadraten* (Composition With Three White Squares, 1973) and *Komposition mit starkem Mittelquadrat*, (Composition With Strong Central Square, 1973).

Mertens also focused on the L-shape motif in other works. She produced pieces in which the interior of the image is structured by different L-shapes, the orientation and design of which vary greatly, as seen in the 1975 works *Vier Quadrate in Quadrate*

und Winkel gegliedert (Blau, Violett, Gelb, Zinnober) (Four Squares Divided Into Squares and L-Shapes (Blue, Violet, Yellow, Vermilion)) and Vier unterteilte Quadrate (Four Divided Squares).

Two opposing L-shapes form the motif of the meander, which is the defining feature of another image type. In these works too, the meander strips and the squares that they enclose on two or three sides are designed in a variety of ways, as seen in the 1975 pieces Quadrate, durch Mäanderlinien gebildet (Squares, Formed by Meander Lines) and Vier quadrate, quadratisch gegliedert (Four Squares, Squarely Divided). The principle of mirrored symmetrical arrangement is increasingly dissolved: The meander is only hinted at, broken down into U-shaped, L-shaped or linear fragments, as seen in Zwei singende und drei stumme Quadrate (Two Singing and Three Silent Squares, 1976), until it disappears completely in works from the artist's final creative period.

The pieces from her last period are images of balance, calm and contemplation. The sparse painted forms in dark grey, yellow and blue seem to float on the white background, creating an impression of immaterial spatiality. It is precisely this meditative depth that makes Mertens's personal style stand out – and with which she succeeded in completely emancipating herself from her strictly constructivist-concrete role models.

Realized in cooperation with Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana (MASI), this exhibition was presented in a slightly different way at Palazzo Reali in Lugano from April to October 2023. The collaboration resulted in the catalog *Hedi Mertens: La logica dell'intuizione / Logik der Intuition*, published by Scheidegger & Spiess / Edizioni Casagrande, featuring texts (in German and Italian) by Francesca Benini, Evelyne Bucher and Medea Hoch, as well as numerous color reproductions of the artworks.

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## MEDIATION PROGRAM

### OPENING

February 7, 6 to 9 pm

Speaking from 6.30 pm: Andreas Durisch, President of the Foundation for Constructivist, Concrete and Conceptual Art, and Sabine Schaschl, Director of Museum Haus Konstruktiv.

### PUBLIC GUIDED TOUR IN ENGLISH

February 28, 6.15 pm

Further guided tours in German: Wednesdays at 6.15 pm and Sundays at 11.45 am

For more information and events, visit: [hauskonstruktiv.ch](http://hauskonstruktiv.ch)

The digital program and the mediation offered on site are constantly being updated.

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